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A hard look at Brown's soft money

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Dec. 16, 1999

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URL: <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?file=/examiner/archive/1999/12/16/NEWS3975.dtl>

FOR ALL the sweet moments of Tuesday's mayoral runoff, Tom Ammiano's

most satisfying time may still lie ahead:

some day after Jan. 1, when "soft money" campaign contributions must be reported to the state.

It will be then that the Board of Supervisors president gets a good look at just how much fear he struck in the hearts of San Francisco's rich and powerful. Given what we've already seen, the revelation could be the biggest ego boost a left-leaning "outsider" has ever received.

Using a legal loophole that's become the size of San Francisco Bay, supporters of incumbent mayor Willie Brown may have coughed up close to \$2 million in 42 short days to make certain Ammiano was vanquished in Tuesday's runoff election. That's a pretty impressive arsenal against a man whom Brown supporters publicly dissed as far-out, unrealistic and representative of only the radical fringe.

Just the image of people like real estate magnate Doug Shorenstein, Gap stores founder Don Fisher and investment banker Warren Hellman, feverishly bent over their checkbooks, should be enough to warm Ammiano's liberal heart for winters to come.

One can almost picture all the members of the newly formed Willie Brown Leadership PAC or San Franciscans for Sensible Government holding big checks (with three or four zeroes penned in) out in front of them like crucifixes meant to keep vampires at bay.

Congratulations, Tom, you and your write-in victory on Nov. 2 scared the hell out of them. AND you forced them to become the best advertisement yet for the need for major campaign finance reform.

Despite a series of ballot measures that have hacked away at excessive campaign contributing - the most recent in 1995 - Brown's supporters found a highly effective way to nullify the people's edict: independent expenditures.

Instead of giving money directly to a candidate's campaign - and thus being bound by The City's tight contributions limit - sympathetic individuals or organizations can simply finance their own TV or radio advertising, mailers or billboards and sing their candidate's praises to high heaven.

Four years ago, this loophole produced only \$2,000 in soft money donations. This time, according to estimates by Common Cause (a reform group), the total will reach at least \$2

million. Almost all of it will have been collected for Brown.

As UC-Berkeley political science professor Bruce Cain told The Examiner's Erin McCormick:

"People are learning how to play the game."

The best part of all for those folks who wrote checks to something like Sagitarians for Mayor Brown or 1965 Impala Owners for Willie is, their identities and specific contributions won't be revealed until after the first of the year. So far, though, we already know that:

* The week before the runoff, the landlord-backed Building Owners and Managers Association dumped \$22,600 into the coffers of the pro-big business San Franciscans for Sensible Government. The Sensibles, bankrolled by individuals like Fisher, Hellman and Shorenstein, and groups like the Committee on Jobs, already had spent a breathtaking \$400,000 for a Brown runoff victory.

* The Alice B. Toklas Lesbian and Gay Democratic Club forked over almost \$200,000 for its pro-Brown TV and mailer ad campaign; \$150,000 of that total came to Alice from an independent committee that didn't even exist before Nov. 23: The Willie Brown Leadership PAC, which was created by a Marin County lawyer.

Among the PAC's contributors are the Golden Gate Restaurant Association (in for at least \$40,000) and a bunch of real estate developers, including Baker Hamilton Properties, who tossed in some \$25,000 each.

Yep. Two million bucks in 42 days for a runoff election. And they're still stuck with Ammiano as president of the Board of Supervisors. As political defeats go, this one is as sweet as a whole crate of Ghirardelli's finest chocolate.

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